



JODI TAYLOR

International Bestseller

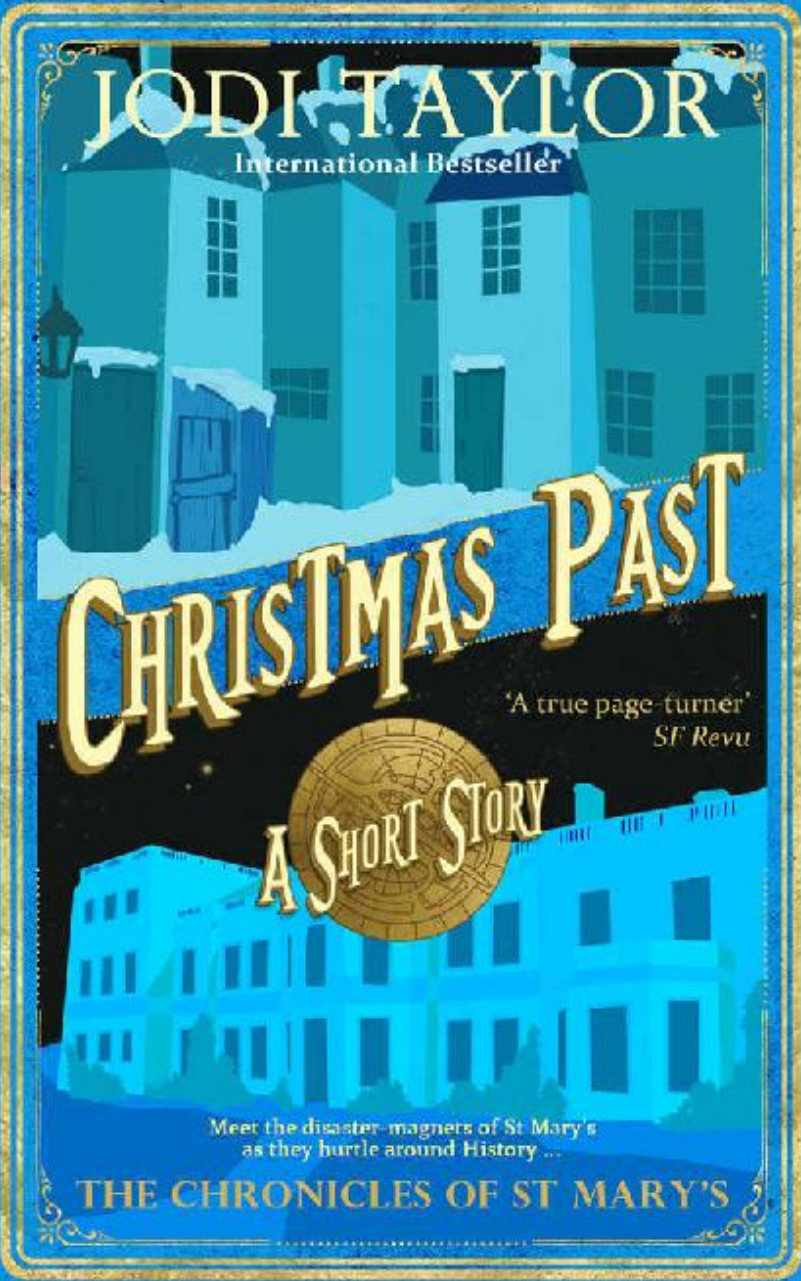
CHRISTMAS PAST

'A true page-turner'
SF Revu

A SHORT STORY

Meet the disaster-magnets of St Mary's
as they hurtle around History ...

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A St Mary's Christmas Story

Jodi Taylor

Dramatis Thingummy

Max	Chief Operations Officer but – for the purposes of this story – trainee mother.
Rosie Lee	PA to Chief Ops Officer. Competent mother.
Mr Dieter	Chief Technician. Tea maker. Almost certainly not a mother.
Polly Perkins	Head of IT. Probably not a mother.
Miss Lingoss	Member of R&D. Not a mother as far as anyone knows, but hard to tell under all that hair.
Leon Farrell	Recovering Chief Technical Officer. Father.
Matthew Farrell	Part-time son. Remembering his past.
Mrs Enderby	Head of Wardrobe. Maternal status not known.
Mrs Midgley	Housekeeper. Maternal status not known.
Mrs Mack	Kitchen Supremo. Maternal status not known.
Tim Peterson	Deputy Director. Still struggling but getting better. Not Max's mother.
Mr Markham	Head of Security. Definitely not Max's mother. Popular opinion says he never had a mother but was somehow spontaneously spawned...
Jamie and Joshua	Climbing boys, apprenticed to Jeremiah Scrope of Grit Court.
Mrs Scrope	Very definitely not a mother.
Mrs Scrope	No – you're not seeing double. Unless you've been at the eggnog again. And why not? The author has.
Jeremiah Scrope	Ex chimney sweep.

It was Christmas Eve and all through the house
St Mary's was heaving like Markham's pet louse.

Sorry, I don't know what came over me then. I've never actually had the urge to rhyme things before. Either old age or too much eggnog, I suspect. Afterwards, when all the dust had settled, I did say to Peterson, 'When you drink eggnog, do you get the urge to write poetry?' To which he replied, 'I'm pleased and proud to announce I've never had the urge either to drink eggnog or write poetry.' So not a great deal of help there.

Anyway, it was Christmas Eve and St Mary's was getting ready for the Big Day. We were busy decorating everything that didn't move, including Vortigern, Mrs Mack's kitchen cat, the most inanimate object on the planet, now sporting a large red tinsel bow. He was currently slumbering heavily on her desk and completely unaware of this new personal adornment, but someone would suffer when he did wake up. Just so long as it wasn't me.

St Mary's looked beautiful. Our admittedly exuberant Christmas decorations covered a multitude of damp patches, peeling plaster, chipped paintwork and mysterious R&D-generated scorch marks. Our special Christmas tree stood to one side of the stairs, leaning slightly as it always did and smothered with tinsel, decorations, and six or seven sets of Christmas lights – which would normally be a cause for concern but fortunately Mr Dieter had supervised the electrics which increased our chances of getting through the Big Day without any major conflagrations. Giant sprigs of holly and ivy had been woven into bizarre three-dimensional shapes we were calling seasonal garlands, and about twenty-five miles of paper chains were festooned across the hall like a giant spider's web from which I, at least, expected Shelob to emerge at any moment, clacking her mandibles and looking for fresh meat.

Succulent smells were already emanating from the kitchen, giving promise of an even better tomorrow.

The giant fireplace stood empty, awaiting the arrival of the Yule log which would be lit in the morning. The Yule log is supposed to burn for the twelve days of Christmas but that would involve something the size of a Canadian redwood, so we were making do with one of the victims of Professor Rapson's log-rolling experiment. The one back in the autumn, when it had become sadly apparent

there wasn't a lumberjack among us and Bashford had nearly drowned.

We do this every year – the Yule log, I mean, not the lumberjack thing. Dr Bairstow has the chimney swept ready and we have the Yule log ceremony. Which basically is not a lot different from the May Day Ceremony or the St George's Day Ceremony or Halloween or Bonfire Night in that it involves lots of alcohol and someone usually gets hurt.

Anyway, the whole place was a hive of activity into which I would be roped if I wasn't careful, so I made my way back to the one place I knew no work would be happening – my office.

Rosie Lee was clearing her desk and preparing to depart for the day. Seeing me, she said, 'Well, I'm off,' and waited for me to say I'd wondered what the smell was, but it was Christmas and I was filled with good will for all mankind. Even this specific specimen of womankind.

'Oh, before I forget.' She pulled out a small present, wrapped in red paper.

'Oh,' I said, touched. 'Thank you so much. You shouldn't have.'

'I didn't,' she said, heading for the door. 'It's for Matthew.'

Honour compelled me at least to try for the last word. 'Where's the 1536 file?'

'In your in tray.'

'And Doggerland?'

'On your desk.'

'And the professor's report on ...'

'Top drawer.' She smirked briefly and slammed the door behind her. Two books fell off my book shelf. I sighed again and yanked open the top drawer to find a small package, wrapped in gold foil and bearing the label, To Max. Merry Christmas. David, Rosie and Benjamin.

I would have felt extremely guilty except that when she opened her bag for her bus fare home she'd find a similar small package labelled To Rosie, Merry Christmas. Leon, Max and Matthew. Revenge is sweet.

Now that the reason for having to set a good example had left for the holidays, there was no need for me even to pretend to continue working. With the exception of Dr Bairstow and Mrs Partridge, I was probably the only person still at her desk anyway and that was bad for my image, so I gave it up and trotted off to wait for Leon and Matthew instead.

I wasn't sure, at that moment, of my exact status. You hear of single-parent families where one of the partners isn't around for some reason, but as far as I know, no one has invented a word for the sole

remaining member of a family where fifty per cent of the parents and a hundred per cent of the kids are living in the future. 'Alone' seemed too depressing a word for it, but I was and had been for some time. These days, it was just me. Leon and Matthew were both living with the Time Police. Leon for medical reasons and Matthew for his own safety. They were, however, returning for Christmas. And Kal was coming down from Thirsk, too. St Mary's likes to gather its chicks for special occasions.

I got to Hawking Hangar half an hour early, but that was OK because Dieter made me a cup of tea while I waited. Christmas had arrived here as well. All the pods were in and were heavily festooned with seasonal black and yellow hazard tape. Someone had spray-snowed Father Christmases and snowflakes all over the windows of Leon's office and, far from taking advantage of the seasonal lull to give the pods a thorough servicing, the entire Technical Section, together with Polly Perkins from IT and Miss Lingoss from R&D – today's hair was a frosty, glittering pale blue – were working on a life-sized mechanical Rudolph whose nose was refusing to glow. My helpful suggestions were ignored.

I finished my tea and wandered outside. The weather was unseasonably warm. I didn't even need a jacket. There would be no white Christmas this year. I made a mental note to ensure Professor Rapson's snow-making machine was mysteriously unavailable. Last year it had gone into overdrive and pumped out unbelievable amounts of white stuff which had spontaneously combusted on contact with the air and the smell of burned rubber had been with us until May.

The Time Police turned up exactly on time. Their small black pod materialised just outside of Hawking. The door opened and Leon and Matthew, hand in hand, stepped out. They turned and waved to someone inside. The pod disappeared.

I walked into Leon's arms – very carefully so as not to overbalance him. He could walk, but only slowly and with a stick. He, Ian Guthrie and Markham had crash-landed in Constantinople. They'd all been badly injured. The pod was destroyed and it hadn't done Constantinople a lot of good either.

'Hey,' he said gently, smiling for me alone. 'All right?'

'Absolutely fine. You?'

'Also absolutely fine.'

I turned to Matthew, waiting patiently. 'Hello there. How about a hug, then?'

He didn't pull away but he wasn't wildly enthusiastic either. I pretended not to notice.

‘How long have you got?’ I asked as we made our way back to Hawking.

‘A week,’ he said as I slipped my arm through his. ‘Then back for another check-up and if there’s no problems, back for good.’

Matthew let go of my hand. ‘I have to find Auntie Lingoss. Tell her about my dirigible.’ He shot off.

‘It’s nice to have you back,’ I said, watching him run on ahead. ‘I can’t remember the last time I woke up with you beside me. How’s Matthew doing?’

There was a slight pause. ‘He’s doing well. They like him. He likes them.’

We stopped walking and looked at each other.

Leon said sadly, ‘I think we’ve lost him, Max.’

I swallowed and said carefully, ‘I don’t think we ever had him. Not since the day Clive Ronan took him away from us. But at least this is his choice. It’s where he wants to be. He’ll be happy there.’

He took my hand. ‘Between us, how many children have we lost?’

‘We haven’t lost this one,’ I said firmly. ‘He can visit us whenever he wants to. I have Commander Hay’s word on that.’

He wouldn’t look at me. ‘Suppose he doesn’t want to?’

I squeezed his hand. ‘We must make sure that he does. Think of the advantages, Leon – we don’t have the burden of being his parents any longer. We’re the favourite aunt and uncle. We let him stay up past his bedtime. We let him watch age inappropriate holos. We let him eat as many sweets as he likes. We let him ride the rollercoaster. And then when he’s sick, fractious and exhausted, we hand him back to the Time Police.’

He couldn’t fold his arms because of his stick, but I could see the thought was there. ‘What rollercoaster?’

I persevered. Before I burst into tears. Because it was all about doing what was right for Matthew.

‘All the boring stuff – the broccoli, the homework, keeping his bedroom tidy, getting his hair cut – that’s all their responsibility. We’re the fun ones. What do you think?’

He bent and kissed my hair again. ‘I think I wish I was as good as you at hiding a broken heart.’

I swallowed and slapped his arm. Gently, in case I knocked him over. ‘Well, you’re not, so live with it.’

He laughed a little and we held each other very tightly for a few minutes and then I took him inside to see Dr Stone.

I left Leon in Sick Bay and went to look for Matthew, finding him sitting on the stairs watching what was going on in the Hall. Stifling my normal urge to go and make him talk to me, I stood and watched

him for a while. His face was a complete blank. What was he thinking? This was his first Christmas with us and although Leon had told me he'd carefully explained what would be happening, he hadn't been quite sure he'd understood.

St Mary's was indeed heaving – forget the louse – although now I come to think of it ... Anyway, Mr Strong was setting up the long tables, which were being laid under Mrs Mack's eagle eye. Kitchen staff were flapping tablecloths big enough to be used as sails on a Viking longboat. And, actually, after Professor Rapson's Atlantic foray last year – the one Dr Bairstow has forbidden us to talk about so you won't hear anything from me – some of them had been.

They were laying out our gleaming white crockery and our best cutlery. The stuff that nearly matched. There were bowls of fruit down the middle of the table. Glassware winked in the bright lights. Every place had a Christmas cracker, handmade by R&D. It was perfectly possible that those pulling them would lose an arm in the subsequent detonation, but the professor had assured me there would be only the tiniest explosion which would be lost in the spectacular shower of glitter and stardust that would cascade from each cracker. I resolved to let someone else pull the first one – just in case. And Matthew not at all if I could help it.

Speaking of whom ... He was looking thoughtful and a little sad, still sitting on the stairs, his chin cupped in his hands, elbows on knees. What was he thinking?

I sat down beside him and tried to get him to talk to me.

'Hey. Is everything all right?'

He nodded. He doesn't talk if gestures will do.

I wasn't sure I believed him, so I said nothing and let the silence gather because sometimes that works. On this occasion, however, it didn't seem to be successful and I was just about to get up and leave him to his thoughts when he said, 'I ...'

I sat back down again and waited. He still finds it difficult to express himself sometimes. He chatters away to Miss Lingoss and Mr Strong. Even to Leon – especially if they're building something together – but with me he's still pretty much tongue-tied. I've learned to say nothing and wait, so I rested my forearms on my knees, watched all the activity in the Hall and waited.

Eventually he said, 'We didn't have this.' He made a gesture with his hand, encompassing all the noise and colour around us.

I assumed that by we, he meant himself and the other climbing boys.

Matthew was stolen from us a few months after he was born. It's a terrible story and I'm not going to tell it now. He'd been stolen away, sold on to various people and eventually ended up as a climbing boy.

There had been three of them altogether, apprenticed to one Jeremiah Scrope who had been bad enough, but his wife, old Ma Scrope, had been a monster.

They say you should ask open questions if you want people to talk. It doesn't work like that with Matthew who was much more comfortable with short questions and even shorter answers. Yes or no are his favourites. Actually, his favourite answer is to say nothing at all. But, he'd initiated this conversation so I was prepared to do the heavy lifting.

'What were their names?'

'James – Jamie. And Joshua.'

His own name had been Joseph. Until Leon had rescued him he hadn't known his real name was Matthew.

If I said, 'Tell me about them,' he'd be so overwhelmed by words that he'd say nothing, so I said, 'They were the other climbing boys, weren't they?' so he could nod.

'You all lived together?'

'In the shed.' He said no more. I waited again.

Looking at his feet, he said, 'It's wrong.'

'What is?'

He struggled. 'This. Last year, we ... Jamie nearly died. He was ill. It's the soot. Makes him cough. It was cold. She sold our blanket. Gin.' He added as I looked at him. 'We didn't work that day. Old Scrope was too drunk to go out but it was too cold to sleep so we just sat. Until it got dark. Rats bite in the dark.'

He wasn't looking at me. He was staring back down the past to his other life. A life I guessed was still sometimes more real to him than this one. I travel in time for a living and I've come back from long assignments and I know how the contemporary world can take a bit of getting used to.

He looked up at me again. 'It's not right.'

I sat silently. No, it wasn't right. That we should have so much and they should have so little. St Mary's does its best. We give to charity. We hold a children's party every year and one day that will go well. I know Mrs Mack and one or two others work at the public food halls for those who can't eat as regularly as they should. Like most people, we do a little bit and try not to admit it's not enough.

He turned to me. 'Can we ...?' He stopped and stared down at his feet, still encased in his favourite light-up trainers.

I said quietly, 'Can we what?'

'You know.' He gestured again. 'Can we ... go there? Take them some ... things? We wouldn't miss them.'

He was right. We wouldn't miss a few things but that wasn't the point. I opened my mouth to tell him, very gently, that no, we

couldn't, because that sort of thing wasn't allowed. And then I closed it again. Because there was no physical reason why I couldn't. The rules had some harsh things to say about interfering with contemporaries. Changing one tiny thing can have enormous consequences, but as I was very fond of saying – they're not my rules.

He started to speak and I said, 'Hush a minute, I'm having a bit of a think.' Since he was always being encouraged to talk as much as possible, he seemed slightly taken aback, but wisely he shut up and we both stared down into the Hall.

I would need ... What would I need?

Food. And lots of it. That wasn't a problem. Mrs Mack would pack me up something appropriate. I probably wouldn't even have to tell her what it was for. Apart from strict adherence to the Flour Handling Regulations, Mrs Mack's approach to the straight and narrow is nearly as wobbly as mine.

Costumes. That might be a problem. I spent some moments trying to devise a scenario that would account for my crying need for two early 19th-century costumes right now, right this moment, on Christmas Eve, and one of those for a small boy, and failed miserably. If Mrs Enderby asked – and she might not but with my luck she would – then I'd tell her ... something or other.

And a pod. Well, that was no problem. I could use Leon's, still quietly hidden at the back of the paint store. Blast doors and two sets of thick walls had saved it from Clive Ronan's attempts to blow us all to kingdom come. It wouldn't be the first time I'd indulged in a teensy-tiny illegal jump at Christmas. It would be the first one I'd ever done alone, though. Markham was back on his feet and completely recovered, but it wasn't fair to involve him in whatever the 19th century might decide to throw at me, and Peterson ... Peterson was confronting his first Christmas without Helen and had enough on his plate.

I should probably also mention something to Leon, and I would. As a wife, obviously, I shouldn't have any secrets from my husband and I made a note to tell him just as soon as I got back. I sighed and hoped Matthew hadn't inherited my lax moral standards.

I stood up.

He looked up. 'Where are you going?'

'Oh,' I said vaguely, rather caught on the hop because you're not supposed to lie to children. I don't know why not – it's not as if they don't lie their socks off to us. And I wasn't just lying. I was also providing a first-class example of deceit, duplicity, trickery, and how, in general, good people shouldn't behave. 'I thought I'd just ...' I gestured, vaguely.

He got up.

‘No,’ I said firmly. ‘You stay here. They’ll be bringing in the Yule log soon and Uncle Markham will be looking for you.’

I patted him on the shoulder and strode off in the direction of Wardrobe. I’d get my costume sorted first.

I looked down to find Matthew trotting along beside me.

‘No,’ I said, slowing to a halt. ‘You have to stay here.’

He said nothing – just glared at me with the eyes that were so like my own. Well, two could play at that game. I glared back with eyes that were so like his own. We glared at each other.

‘You won’t know the way,’ he said quietly.

Bugger. Busted. By my own kid. How did that happen?

‘What?’ I said, pretending ignorance.

‘You won’t know the way to Grit Lane. There’s a lot of alleys. Some wrong people live there. I should come.’

I paused. I still wasn’t sure he quite grasped ... things. Whether he knew he’d been living in another time, or whether he thought he’d just moved a few miles up the road from Grit Lane to St Mary’s, where people lived nicer lives. And then sometimes he would say something that made me wonder if he didn’t know more than the rest of us put together.

‘Wouldn’t you be afraid to go back?’

‘No. Yes. A little bit.’

At that moment, he sounded so like me that I nearly laughed. With Leon’s dark hair and stocky build and his love of putting things together – or more often of taking them apart – I sometimes wondered if there was anything of me in Matthew at all, but this disregard for the rules and complete inability both to tell the truth and to lie – that was all me.

I stared at him while I took a moment to think. Taking him back might do him good. He could see his friends again. Say a proper goodbye. Leon had yanked him out of that life and brought him back to St Mary’s, confused, sullen and half wild. It would also enable him to see how far he had come since those days. He might even learn to value his new life.

But ...

I pulled him against the wall where we could talk quietly. Not that anyone could hear us above the racket in the Hall, but I always say better safe than sorry. And that’s about as close to Health and Safety as I get.

‘You must understand – this trip is for you only. You can go and see your friends, but when we leave they must stay behind. Do you understand why?’

He shook his head.

‘That is their life. That is the time in which they were born and

that is where they must remain.'

'I came here. Why can't they?'

'You were born here. In this time,' I said, crossing my fingers behind my back because that wasn't strictly true. 'This is where you belong. You were stolen from us and Daddy came to rescue you. Remember?'

He nodded.

'It's good that you're concerned about your friends. And we will take them some presents for Christmas – to make their lives a little easier. But at the end of the visit you must understand – they can't come back with us. If you can't understand that then you can't come. I know that these are difficult things for you and perhaps it would be easier – less upsetting – for you to stay behind and I'll take the presents to your friends and give them your love.'

'No. I want to come.'

'If you come – if you come – you must do exactly as I say, exactly when I say it. Do you understand?'

He nodded too easily.

'No, I mean it. If I say run, then you run. So I'll ask again. Do you understand?'

He nodded again.

I was still suspicious. We'd done this before when he defied me. When he would just refuse to budge, fold his arms, stare at me and look just like his father.

'No, Matthew. This is not one of those times when I let you get away with it.' I took a deep breath. 'I will take you if you want to come, but only if I can trust you to do as you're told. When I go out with Uncle Markham or Auntie Sykes they know this. You must too.'

He thought for a moment and then nodded.

'OK then. Let's go and talk to Mrs Enderby.'

We were in luck. Mrs Enderby, Mrs Midgely and Mrs Mack were sitting in the relative peace of Wardrobe, stitching together big red bows. That's the problem with putting up decorations in something the size of our Great Hall. You can't just shove a bit of tinsel on the mantelpiece and call it a day. You need to think big. These bows were for tying back the long curtains.

A large bottle of sherry nearby was evidence that they were already thinking big. That and their flushed faces, but on the other hand it was very hot in here.

Mrs Enderby shot us her usual sweet smile. Mrs Midgely shot us her usual hostile glance. Mrs Mack remained on neutral ground and topped up her glass.

I made sure the door was closed and pulled out a chair.

‘At this time of year, we remember absent friends –’ I had a sudden flashback to Helen crumpling to the floor with that small neat hole over her eyebrow, ‘– and Matthew has concerns about the ones he left behind. We all saw the state of him when he arrived here and there are two more like that where he came from.’

I saw Mrs Mack stir with alarm.

‘No, relax, I’m not proposing a rescue mission. We got ourselves into enough trouble last time.’

Some years ago, we’d lifted a contemporary from the war zone that was Troy. We’d saved his life but very nearly at the expense of our own.

‘I’m simply proposing we take them a little something to make their lives less ... unpleasant. Mrs Mack, I was wondering if you could make me up a care package. Something that two ...’ I glanced at Matthew ‘... three little boys would enjoy. They’ll be very cold and very hungry.’

She nodded, put aside her giant red bow and stood up. ‘Come and see me in half an hour.’ She disappeared out of the door.

Mrs Enderby tucked her needle into her cardigan and said, ‘Come with me young man.’

They disappeared.

I looked at Mrs Midgely. Our housekeeper is always a bit of an unknown quantity. She looked back. I smiled at her because that usually works. People will do a lot to stop me smiling at them.

She sighed loudly and stood up. ‘Two blankets, yes?’

‘Yes,’ I said, ‘but not good ones because their last one was sold for gin.’

‘I understand,’ she said and then she too disappeared.

I followed after Matthew and Mrs Enderby.

She’d provided him with a shapeless brown hat, a thick brown flecked tweed jacket that belted around the waist, matching knee breeches, thick knitted stockings and a stout pair of shoes. Everything was slightly too big for him but we had no choice. We don’t cater for children.

‘An additional pair of socks should help with the shoes, I think,’ she said. ‘And turn back the cuffs on the jacket. Yes, that’s much better.’ She topped everything off with a thick muffler and some knitted gloves.

‘And you Max, what sort of impression do you wish to make?’

I thought. ‘Well off, but not rich. Nothing that I’m going to get killed for. Warm, but able to move fast should I have to. Think middle class, affluent, assured. I’m going to need some authority if we find ourselves in trouble.’ And once again I had a huge stab of guilt. Not over what I was doing – but the fact that Matthew was

doing it with me.

I was handed a dark blue dress and matching pelisse trimmed with fake fur, a close fitting but plain bonnet, leather gloves, and a dark fur muff. I would wear my own boots. Just in case things turned nasty.

We couldn't wear our costumes around St Mary's, so we stuffed it all into a sports bag and set off for Mrs Mack, who was waiting for us. She'd packed two large cardboard boxes. 'And when they've eaten everything in sight,' she said, 'they can flatten the boxes and sleep on them. Keep them off the floor. They're biodegradable, so they shouldn't do any harm. As far as I know, no one in the 19th century dies of cardboard box-related contamination.'

I peeped inside the boxes. There were four pies. 'Two chicken and ham and two steak and kidney,' she said. 'Two giant slabs of Christmas cake. Bread rolls. Cheese. Apples. Chocolate. Tangerines. Mince pies. A bag of roast chicken drumsticks. Ditto of grilled sausages. And a flask of hot soup. Bring the flask back or don't bother coming back at all.'

I nodded. 'Thank you. This is marvellous.'

Matthew pulled my sleeve and gestured behind me. I wouldn't have been surprised if it was Dr Bairstow – he knows everything that goes on in his unit before it even happens – you should hear Markham on the subject – but it was Mrs Midgley, with three old stained blankets. Refugees from one of the pods, I guessed.

'Three blankets?'

'Well ... yes,' she said in surprise. 'One to be discovered and sold for gin, and the other two to be concealed and used for the benefit of two cold little boys. Don't you think?'

I stared at her. 'Brilliant.' Which it was. I should have thought of that.

Actually, no. Not brilliant. We had two sports bags full of clothes, hats and gloves. We had two cardboard boxes stuffed full of good things to eat. And we had three good-sized albeit slightly smelly blankets. There was no way we were going to get this lot through St Mary's unnoticed.

That's when things started to get away from me a little because while I was formulating and discarding various methods of getting all this lot plus one small boy to the paint store – and believe me, each idea was more bizarre than the last – Peterson and Markham turned up.

Markham greeted me with his usual sunny smile and went to help himself to a sausage. Mrs Mack cleared her throat and he suddenly decided his hand would be safer in his pocket.

Peterson – oh, how I worried about Tim Peterson – enquired

casually if I was going somewhere.

I rearranged my features to an expression of complete innocence. 'No. What makes you say that?'

'Well, it's Christmas Eve.'

'Yes? And?'

'Well, it's traditional, isn't it? Every Christmas Eve we seize on the very flimsiest of excuses and whirl ourselves off down the timeline. You get us into trouble. I save the day with the elegant competence for which I am famed, and Markham becomes home to yet another set of indigenous wildlife. Tradition.'

I shook my head. 'No, I'm sorry, guys, not this time. This is a family affair.'

Markham blinked indignantly. 'We're family.'

'No, we're not,' said Peterson firmly. 'There are no circumstances in the world in which I'm ever going to admit to being related to you. No one would. Even Hunter won't admit it and she's married to you.'

He paused hopefully.

And paused. And paused.

Markham regarded him guilelessly. And silently.

Eventually Peterson gave in and turned his full attention to weaker prey. 'So, Max, what's going on?'

'Who's asking?'

He looked surprised. 'I am. Didn't you hear my question?'

'No, I mean, in which capacity are you asking?'

'In my capacity as the person who wants to know what's going on. Who else?'

'No, I mean, at this precise moment, are you My Friend Tim? Or Dr Peterson, that well-known maverick time traveller and disaster magnet? Or are you DD? And no, that's not his bra size,' I said before Markham could get a word in because that's his favourite joke.

Markham said, 'Aaaaw,' and his hand began to stray towards a consolatory sausage. I don't think he realised he was doing it. Hunter always says his outlying regions have a life of their own and then blushes violently as all of St Mary's takes a collective breath to enquire which outlying regions are the worst behaved.

Mrs Mack gently moved them to half an inch beyond even his monkey-like reach.

Matthew, impatient at all this time-wasting talk, pulled at my sleeve.

'Sorry,' I said to them, 'but we have to go.'

'We?' said Peterson sharply. 'You're not taking young Matthew here, are you?'

Silently, synchronizably – is that even a word? – Matthew and I both folded our arms and glared at him.

‘Dear God,’ said Markham. ‘There’s two of them.’

Behind me, I could hear Mrs Mack and Mrs Midgley folding their arms as well. The air crackled with female defiance.

Peterson took my arm and led me to one side. ‘Max, I’m not sure about this’.

‘We’re only delivering a care package,’ I said. ‘We’ll be fine.’

‘I can’t believe you’re taking Matthew along.’

‘It’s for his benefit. He’s unhappy and guilty about having so much. Let’s face it, Tim, at Christmas we do tend to do conspicuous consumption. I think it’s to his credit that he’s thinking about his friends and wants to do something to help them. You must see that.’

‘I do see that, but not that he should be the one to do it. You and I could easily nip back and get this sorted out. Twenty minutes – job done. There’s no need for him to go at all.’

‘I think there is,’ I said slowly. ‘I think he needs this.’

‘But why?’

Good question. I struggled to put my feelings into words. ‘He needs to see his friends again. He needs to show them – and himself – that he still cares. He needs to give back something of what he now has. And I need to do it with him – not as Max, head of the History Department, but as Max his mother. It’s something we should do together.’

I stopped and looked at my feet, embarrassed.

He looked at me for a long time and then smiled and stepped back. ‘OK.’ He looked at the boxes. ‘You’ll never get all this around the building without someone noticing. We’ll give you a hand.’

Down in the paint store, we deposited the boxes outside Leon’s pod. You couldn’t see it because the camouflage circuit was activated but it was there, nevertheless.

‘Thanks Tim.’

He turned to me. ‘Listen to me. Back in one hour. Without fail. You can spend all afternoon there if you like, but back here in one hour. I’ll be waiting.’

‘We’ll be waiting,’ said Markham. ‘And don’t even think of being late.’

‘What are you two? My mother?’

‘For the purposes of making sure you do as you’re told,’ said Peterson. ‘Yes. Come here, young Matthew.’

Matthew stepped up looking apprehensive.

‘Keep an eye on your mother,’ said Peterson sternly.

He nodded.

‘And do exactly as she says. We always do and that’s why we always come home safely.’

Matthew nodded again.

‘In that case, don’t let us keep you. One hour, Max.’

‘Got it.’

He said quietly, ‘Take care. Come back safe.’

‘I will.’ I pushed Matthew towards the pod and said, ‘Door.’

As usual I’ve gone careering off into the story without explaining anything. It’s a bit late in the day, but here we go.

We work for the Institute of Historical Research at St Mary’s Priory, just outside of Rushford. We investigate major historical events in contemporary time. Yes, all right, it’s time travel. Just don’t expect me to admit it.

We have pods in which we live and work while we investigate these major historical events. They’re small, battered, apparently stone-built shacks that fit inconspicuously into almost any century. They’re also squalid and cramped, especially this one because it’s only a single-seater. The Technical Section is completely incapable of getting any of the toilets to work properly and all the pods smell of stale cabbage. No one knows why. They just do. You get used to it.

Once inside, I activated the screen and watched the door of the paint store close behind Markham and Peterson. I donned my mother hat and said to Matthew, ‘Can you tell me the time, please?’

He stared at the console and breathed heavily, whispering to himself, ‘Small hand on three,’ finally saying, ‘half past three.’

‘So, what time do we need to be back by?’

More whispering. ‘Half past four.’

‘Well done.’

It didn’t really matter – it’s time travel and we could spend as long as we liked there and still return at half past four, but I recognised Tim’s concern. I’d make sure we were back on time.

We took a while to change. I went to help him but he seemed familiar enough with buttons and things. I pulled his hat low on his forehead to keep his ears warm. He pulled it back up again. I climbed into my own costume with no problems. The style might be 19th century but the construction was modern. I tucked my hair under my bonnet, had my muff and gloves ready, and laid in coordinates I knew I would never forget. Grit Lane, London 1821 – where Leon had found Matthew living a terrible life. More last-minute doubt assailed me and I turned to him.

‘You’re sure about this? I can go alone if it’s easier for you. No,’ I said, as he went to speak. ‘Think carefully before answering. This won’t be easy for you.’

He did think carefully. He stared at the floor and then nodded. ‘Yes.’

‘OK then. Close your eyes.’

He screwed them tight shut.

I stood beside him and took his hand. 'Computer – initiate jump.'
'Jump initiated.'
And the world went white.

I gave him a minute and then said, 'You can open your eyes if you like. We've arrived.'

He opened first one and then the other. 'Are we here?'

'We are.' I pointed to the screen, which, if life imitated art, would show a bustling London scene with horses, carriages, elegant ladies walking arm in arm with bewhiskered gentlemen and with a helpful newspaper blowing around giving the date.

Sadly, we're St Mary's not a big budget blockbuster holo and all we could see was a brick wall. But a 19th-century brick wall nevertheless.

I panned the cameras around. We appeared to have landed in a narrow alleyway. Leon's pod is the smallest we have, but we were taking up rather a lot of room and the alley hadn't been large to begin with. We were going to have to squeeze out of the door. You never see that happen in time travel movies either.

I checked Matthew over once more, pulling his hat down because it was cold out there. He pulled it back up again.

'Listen to me. Either you hold my hand or my dress. Not because you're a baby, but because I need to know where you are at all times. Is that agreed?'

He agreed. He didn't look happy, but he didn't argue.

I couldn't put it off any longer. I opened the door.

The smell hit me at once. And the freezing fog. I was immediately transported back to Whitechapel all those years ago, when Kal and I were young and reckless and searching for Jack the Ripper and he found us first. It all came rushing back. The panic. The terror. The pain. And running. There had been an enormous amount of running. And then we'd been cornered in an alleyway very similar to this one and Kal had been stabbed ...

I pulled myself together. The Ripper wouldn't be along for another seventy years yet.

We squeezed out of the door. It wouldn't have been such a squeeze for me if I'd heeded Helen Foster's exhortations to lose ten pounds, but I think we all know that was never going to happen. True, Dr Stone hadn't mentioned it yet, but he would one day. It was only a question of time.

Matthew, of course, slipped through with no problems at all. It was foggy and visibility wasn't good but I thought he grinned at me. I regarded him balefully and thought unmotherly thoughts.

I looked around. We had high brick walls on either side of us, streaked with soot, grime and other things at splash height that I

didn't want to know about.

I straightened my bonnet and shook out my skirts.

'Do you know where we are?'

He nodded. I sighed. Great. No chattier in this century than in the other one.

'Can you show me the way? Is it far?'

'Yes. No.'

Sometimes he really reminds me of his father. On the other hand, of course, whose father should he remind me of?

I picked up my box with the blankets on top, took a breath and said, 'Got your box?'

'Yes.'

'Right, off we go then.'

This was definitely not the better end of town. The narrow alley was packed with rubbish and food so rotted even the starving poor wouldn't eat it. We passed a dead cat. The ground was slippery with a dreadful kind of slush comprising mud, slime, decomposing animals and vegetables, shit, urine and other things too dreadful to investigate.

'Keep to the centre,' I said, nudging him in front of me where I could see him. We picked our way carefully along, slipping and sliding as we went. I know the day was cold and raw but I couldn't help thanking the god of historians it wasn't summer – the stench would have been overwhelming. Today, however, even though it was only mid-afternoon, the day was so overcast and dull we could barely see our way, and the smell was just the right side of bearable.

Emerging from the alleyway, I looked left and right. Dark clouds hung low but there were no lights anywhere.

Tales of this time often portray the streets of London as heaving with life – even if that life is fistfights, prostitutes offering a quick knee-trembler against the wall, gin-soaked women dropping their babies down flights of steps, old women robbing the dead, men beating their wives in a drunken rage, cockfights, and horses dropping dead in the streets. And for all I know that might be the norm, but not today. Today, Christmas Eve, with the biting temperatures freezing the very marrow in my bones, everyone was inside. There were no lights because candles cost money. There was certainly no form of street lighting in this area. The road on which we now stood was paved, but not well. Potholes gaped around us. No wheeled vehicle would ever make it down this little street. The houses on either side huddled together, dark and oppressive. The smell was just as bad, even though we were out of the alleyway. Everywhere was deserted. There wasn't a soul in sight.

Yes, there was. Something moved in the shadows.

‘Stay in the middle of the road.’ That was Matthew saying it this time, because as I peered into the shadows, something moved.

I had another Jack the Ripper moment.

Deep in a doorway, something unfolded and became either a very small man or a large boy. He said nothing – just standing and staring at us. And the boxes we carried. This was poverty’s front line. They would kill us for what we carried and the clothes we wore without even thinking about it.

My muff was sitting on top of my box where I could get to it easily. Or rather, get to the pepper spray inside it, although I hoped it wouldn’t come to that. Further back in the dark recess, something else stirred. And then in another doorway on the other side of the narrow street, something else moved.

My heart thumped unpleasantly. What had I got us into?

I said quietly, ‘Matthew, put down your box and when I say run ...’

He shook his head. ‘Walk.’

‘We leave the boxes to distract them and while they’re looting the contents we can get away.’

He shook his head again and shouted something. I didn’t understand a word of it. He shouted again and the only word I recognised was ‘Scrope.’

The figures melted back into the doorways.

‘Walk,’ he said. ‘Don’t run’. Which made a change, although escaping death by walking slowly is equally as heart pounding. Still, I’ll try anything once.

‘What did you say to them?’

‘I told them it was for Ma Scrope.’

I said nothing and carried on walking. What sort of power must she wield in this place? What fear did she inspire? She was inspiring a fair bit in me and I hadn’t even met her yet. And then I remembered the state of Matthew when I first saw him and the probable state of the two little boys still with her, took a tighter grip on my box, lifted my chin and said, ‘Let’s keep going.’

He turned a sharp left between two dark buildings. They were far too dilapidated to be called houses, even though people lived in them. The roof had almost gone on one of them. Whether it had caved in or been stolen was impossible to say.

I halted at the head of a blind alley. The hair rose on the back of my neck. It was in an alleyway just like this one where the Ripper had got us. That hadn’t gone well for any of us, actually. I’d had to chop his head off in the end. I’d nearly taken my own foot off in the process. And even then, he hadn’t died ...

‘Down here,’ Matthew said, setting off into the gloom. I swallowed hard, took a tighter grip on my box, and followed after him.

The alley was cold and wet. I could hear water dripping from somewhere. The walls were green with slime, the only colour in this grey world. If there had ever been any paving here it had long since been buried under layer upon layer – generations of layers – of shit, rotting straw, stinking vegetables, and worse. All the refuse and decay from people with no access to sanitation of any kind, no fresh water, no fresh air, no heat, no light, no decent food, no hope ...

My feet sank into this quagmire with every step. Evil smelling water rose over my boots. I wouldn't be surprised if the bottom layers hadn't been here since the Great Fire in 1666.

Again, there was silence all around us. The silence of misery and despair. The people living here didn't even have the strength to fight with each other. I imagined tiny rooms, crammed with people but isolated in their wretchedness and suffering, sitting quietly because life – such as it was – just wasn't worth fighting for. Sitting alone and waiting for death to release them.

For God's sake, Maxwell – this isn't why you're here. Pull yourself together. I tried to tell myself all this had happened a very long time ago, but the evidence of my own eyes told me it was happening now. All around me. Suddenly, our little boxes of food seemed very inadequate indeed.

I squelched my way behind Matthew and was just about to enquire how much further when the buildings to my left fell away – quite literally, actually – and a small space opened up before us.

I turned and looked back the way we'd come. That must have been Grit Lane and this must be Grit Court, although court was far too grand a name for the collection of dilapidated buildings around this irregular space.

Ahead of us loomed a tall building, four or five storeys high, speckled with empty windows. On the left was a blank brick wall, black with soot, and on the right a small, ramshackle wooden shed only a moderate puff of wind away from falling down.

I looked around us. Had this dismal place really been his home?

'Where?' Great, now I was picking up his monosyllabic habits.

He nodded towards the wooden shed.

I cast a glance around me. There were a lot of windows. All were dark. Most were shuttered or stuffed with rags to keep the cold out, but anyone could be watching. I found myself missing Markham. Don't ever tell him that.

'They're in there?'

He nodded.

'That's where you lived?'

He nodded again. I noticed he was standing very close to me. I didn't blame him in the slightest. What must it have taken for him to

come back here today? I suddenly felt very proud of him.

I could see the bar across the door plainly enough, but it would be good for him to lead, so I said, 'How do we get in?'

'This way.' He put his shoulder under the bar and heaved it upwards. With a nasty graunching noise that made me look over my shoulder to see if anyone was coming to investigate, it came free. We set it carefully against the wall.

'You go first,' I said. 'I don't want to frighten them. I'll bring the boxes.'

The tatty door scraped open.

We stood on the threshold, blinking. There were no windows and the only light came from the open door which we were blocking anyway. After a while, I thought I could see the outline of a handcart, filled with buckets, poles, brushes and all the tools of a sweep's trade. Of two little boys, there was no sign.

Matthew took a step inside. I remained where I was, watching the court for any signs of life. There were none. I assumed everyone was inside suffering gin-induced after effects.

Eventually he said, 'Jamie? Joshua?'

Something stirred back in the darkness and a tiny voice piped, 'Joe?'

He said something, again in that dialect I couldn't understand and there was another movement.

I wondered if they wouldn't come out because I was here although I'm not that frightening. Honestly.

I said, 'Just a minute,' put down my box, pulled out my torch and handed it to him. 'Here. Just wait until I have the door closed.'

Stepping back out into the yard, I caught hold of the latch – gently, because I was certain if I gave it a good yank then the whole thing would come off its hinges, possibly bringing the rest of the shed down with it – and, keeping an eye on the tall house, began to close the door. I did think, just for a moment, that I saw a faint flicker of light in the downstairs window and held my breath. Seconds passed but nothing happened, so I pulled the door to and said, 'OK.'

The torchlight picked out two little boys huddled in the far corner, shivering with cold. Amazingly, they looked wet. I looked up. Yes, there were holes in the roof through which I could see grey clouds, but the dirt floor was dry. Where had the water come from?

In the silence, I heard a drop of water fall and then another. Matthew shone the torch on to the handcart which gleamed weakly in the light. They'd been cleaning the cart and the brushes. With ice-cold water, I bet. They were soaked and shivering, their bare feet blue and cracked. Their clothes gave rags a bad name and were wet through. I felt a slow burn of anger. Now I knew why Matthew

disliked water so much.

I said in a whisper, 'Go and talk to them, Matthew. Take them their blankets.'

He snatched them up. I watched as he folded them and carefully draped one each around their shoulders. They were both smaller than he was and he wasn't big by anyone's standards. He covered the smallest one first.

They stared up at him as if they couldn't believe their eyes.

I meanwhile, was unpacking the boxes any old how, flattening the cardboard and passing them over to him.

'Matthew, get them to sit on these rather than the cold floor.'

Finding the waterproof matches, I lit the candles, carefully placing them on the floor.

It was a small shed, about twelve feet by twelve, made of rough planks nailed together any old how and looked about as weatherproof as a lace doily. The handcart took up most of the space. I couldn't see into the roof, but judging by the scuttling sounds up there we weren't alone. I remembered Matthew saying the rats came in the dark.

'Now then,' I said, briskly, because if I wasn't brisk, I might start to cry. 'Shall we see what we have here?' and held out the bag containing the sausages.

They wouldn't take it. They sat, big eyed and frozen with fear, little faces peering out from their blankets.

Jamie was the smaller of the two. Huge sunken eyes stared out from his grey face. He had very little hair – most of his scalp seemed to be covered in sores and scabs. His knees and elbows were rubbed raw and scabbed over. I remembered Matthew's had been the same. He too was burned, especially on his feet and some very nasty bruises were clearly visible through the rag he was wearing as a shirt. I suspected either he'd had a bad fall or been punched. Or kicked, even. He looked too frail for this job and I suspected he hadn't been strong to begin with. Every now and then he hacked out a cough that shook him from top to toe.

Joshua was slightly older and slightly bigger. His shock of dark, matted, soot-filled hair hung either side of his face. He looked more robust than Jamie but then, paper bags looked more robust than Jamie. Like Jamie, he was fearful, but with a kind of defiant belligerence in his look. He would survive. Of Jamie's survival, I was far less certain.

Matthew was obviously the oldest. Watching his behaviour, I suspected he had been their protector. Jamie's blanket slipped from his shoulders and I watched Matthew pull it back around him, saying something that made him smile.

Which reminded me I was still holding the sausages. I gave one to Matthew and said, 'Show them.'

His table manners are a lot better than they used to be. These days, no one is actually injured in his determination to eat as much as possible in as short a time as possible but, on the other hand, he does like sausages. One minute it was there and the next minute it wasn't.

I passed him the bag, saying, 'They might find it easier if you give it to them.'

He held out a sausage to each of them. I could only imagine the fear that must be holding them back. Did they expect to be punished for eating? I was going to have to give this Scrope woman a seriously good talking to.

So fast that I could barely see it, their sausages had gone and they were rummaging in the bag for more.

'Careful,' I said to him. 'Don't let them gobble the food too quickly. It could make them sick.'

I don't think anyone was listening to me. I could understand their haste. Yes, they were starving, but it didn't need the fearful looks they kept casting to the door to suss out their real concern. They were terrified of the not-here-but-somehow-always-present Ma Scrope. I had forgotten, until this moment, how suspicious and resentful Matthew had been towards women – with the exception of the follicly exuberant, dirigible-building, pig-exploding Miss Lingoss, of course, who was, in his eyes, not so much a woman as a god. I hadn't even bothered trying to compete. Actually, I gather I'm not alone in this. Rosie Lee was telling me her son is always coming home telling her about the bane of her life – David's mum. Apparently, David's mum doesn't make him clean his bedroom. David's mum lets him stay up to watch Iron Man 6. David's mum doesn't make him eat his peas, and so on, inspiring her with a desire to punch David's mum's lights out which I could perfectly comprehend.

I spread the spare blanket on the ground and laid out our feast. Chicken, cake, mince pies, everything. Personal experience of Matthew had given me to think they'd fall on everything like a pack of wolves and thirty seconds later there wouldn't be anything left. That didn't happen. They just stared in bewilderment, their weary pinched grey faces peering out from the folds of their blankets.

I said to Matthew, 'Tell them it's all right to eat. It's all for them.'

He spoke again in this strange dialect I couldn't understand. I wondered if it was a private language between just the three of them. A little thing all of their own and private from this Ma Scrope who appeared to inspire such fear in nearly everyone. Leon had said she was an unpleasant woman and I was beginning to suspect he hadn't

told me the half of it.

Hesitatingly, the slightly bigger one reached out for a drumstick. And paused. Matthew picked one up and handed it to him. He bit into it – his face changed – and we were off. They fell on the food like a pack of ravening wolves. The drumsticks disappeared, followed by the cheese, the mince pies, the cake, the meat pies, the chocolate – which they regarded with deep suspicion for nearly a whole second – and finally the soup. I poured it into the two mugs we'd brought, blew on it, said to Matthew, 'Warn them it's hot,' and passed it over.

He blew on it himself, took a careful sip and then gave it to them. They never took their eyes off him. Very gently, he showed them how to wrap their hands around the mugs for warmth. The air was filled with the sounds of very noisy slurping. When they'd finished, they ran their fingers around the insides, picking up every last drop.

That done, Jamie carefully turned over all the wrappings in the vain hope they'd missed something. I took the opportunity to 'find' another bar of chocolate in my muff – don't make me do all those old muff jokes again – and gave it to Matthew to give to them. I would have loved to have given it to them myself, but given Ma Scrope and her seemingly effortless ability to inspire terror in everyone she met, it really wouldn't be a good thing to give them the idea women were nice people. I suspected mistrust and distance and downright fear were the best ways to deal with her and I shouldn't do anything to undermine that.

And then the time came. The food was all eaten – every last scrap of it. There was no reason to stay.

I looked at Matthew and braced myself for the inevitable request to take them with us. I'd meant well, but I wasn't convinced I hadn't done more harm than good. I'd raised expectations and yes, all right, they'd had a good meal on Christmas Eve – and I suspected they'd hidden a little bit away for tomorrow as well – as Matthew used to do when we first got him back – but there was nothing more I could do here. Nothing more I should do. I'd learned my lesson at Troy. We all had. People had died – innocent people who hadn't deserved it. You try to help but, in the end, you just make things worse.

I gestured at the boys. 'What are they saying?'

'That we should go. Before old Scrope gets back. He'll be out drinking.'

'And Mrs Scrope?' I jerked my head over my shoulder in the direction of the house.

'Drinks all the time. They fight. And shout. And then ...'

He left the rest unsaid.

I stared at the last flickering candle. Yes, we should go. We should go ...

I scrambled to my feet and shook out my crumpled skirts. 'Wait here.'

What a stupid thing to say. I saw the panic in his eyes. He too jumped to his feet, grasping a fold of my skirt. 'No.'

I put my hand over his cold one. 'It's all right, Matthew. I'm just going to speak to Mrs Scrope. I didn't think you would want her to see you again. And it would give you more time with Jamie and Joshua.'

'No.' He turned his hand under mine and grasped it hard.

'Of course. You can come too. I'll put our stuff together. You say goodbye.'

I busied myself with packing everything away, not that there was much left, just to give them a little privacy. When I looked up he was showing them how to lay out the flattened cardboard as a mattress and wrapping them up in their blankets. Their lives might be utter shit, but tonight they'd had a feast and there was a warm bed to look forward to.

'I've told them to hide the blankets during the day.'

'Good boy. Are you ready?'

He nodded, biting his lip. Jamie started to cry. I guessed Joshua was crying as well but silently. Oh God, this was awful. This is what happens if you interfere. No matter how well you mean, you just make everything so much worse. The last candle was fading fast and I could see the expression on Matthew's face. And on the other boys' faces as well. Fear, pleading and, above all, desperation.

I'm an historian. We record and document. That's it. That's all we're allowed to do. We're not supposed to interfere. Ever.

I said, 'Come on,' and the two of us, Matthew and me, stepped out into the yard. I closed the door on the sound of crying. Matthew stood silently. I picked up the bar and slotted it back into place, imprisoning two cold, hungry little boys. In the dark. With the rats.

Something rose up inside me and would not be denied.

I said again, 'Come on.'

He trotted beside me as I stamped across the filthy yard. 'Where are we going?'

I found myself in front of the dark house. Nothing moved anywhere. It was cold and it was dark. The temperature was dropping fast. I could practically hear the frost forming around me.

Taking a firm grip on the pepper spray inside my muff I banged on the door. Long and hard. To give myself courage.

Matthew tried to pull me back. 'No. You mustn't.'

'I'm only going to have a word with Mrs Scrope.'

'No. You can't. Leave now.'

I put my hand on his shoulder. 'Don't be afraid.'

The door remained firmly closed. I will admit I did hope she was out somewhere, quaffing gin as fast as she could go, falling into a stupor in a doorway somewhere and never coming home again. Anything that meant she wouldn't be opening this door and making me confront her.

Just as I was beginning to think my wish might come true and no one was in after all, I heard the sounds of someone fumbling with the latch on the other side of the door.

Matthew gasped and moved behind me. I kept one hand on his shoulder and the other on my spray. I was doing something really stupid here and I couldn't be too careful – and that's me saying that.

The rackety old door creaked open, scraping itself across the stone floor. And there she was – the legendary Ma Scrope.

My first thought was, Shit!

My second thought was, Shit!

My third thought was something along those lines as well.

Matthew and I clutched at each other and then I remembered I was his mother and mothers aren't afraid of anything. True, we're not fond of mud, blood and long forgotten banana skins welded to the floor under the bed, but fear strikes no terror into our hearts.

I think I was expecting some mountain of a woman, all massive body and brawny arms and ready to lay about her at a moment's notice. Someone reeking of gin or brandy, rudely awoken from a drunken sleep, with a thick head, bloodshot eyes and a temper to match.

She wasn't like that at all. Although I had got the gin bit right.

She wasn't any bigger than me, and considerably less wide. In fact, she looked to be nearly as skeletal as the two little boys in her shed. The dirty hand clutching a threadbare shawl around her bony shoulders was curled, talon-like, ending in long, thick, yellow finger nails. Long snarls of greasy hair hung from a cap so ancient it was virtually part of her head. God knows when she'd last taken it off. If ever. She wore a torn and fraying dress of a style from some twenty years before. It hung off her thin frame, the original colour lost under a thick coating of dirt, grease and unpleasant stains. The rancid smell of greed and brutality hung around her, wafting over us with every movement.

My heart sank because I knew what I was looking at here. When we think of misers, we think of someone – a man usually – going to sometimes quite comical lengths to save himself a penny and that's true as far as it goes, but there's more to it than that.

Ma Scrope was a miser, neglecting and brutalising her husband's apprentices not just to benefit herself, but because she couldn't help

it. And far from spending the money she saved by cutting their food and clothing to the bone on herself, she would have it all squirrelled away in secret places, because the joy was in the possession. And if she wasn't prepared to spend on herself then there was no way I could persuade her to spend a little more on the two small boys in the shed. She would hold herself to the same low standards as the boys out there. I doubt she'd had a good meal in years. Or changed her clothes in all that time either. She allowed herself the barest minimum to get by, consuming just enough to survive. Feeding the boys just enough to keep them on their feet and working. I wouldn't mind betting her husband wasn't that well fed either. Although he could at least call in at a pie shop on the way home from work. I wondered if he would dare, because the face of the woman still staring at me was scaring me shitless. And God knows what it was doing to Matthew.

Whatever it was, we couldn't stand here all afternoon staring at each other, but I was at a complete loss. This was not a woman I could intimidate. I had nothing to threaten her with.

And then she saw Matthew.

Her eyes narrowed and she threw me a nasty calculating look that assessed me, my clothes, and what sort of threat I posed.

'Who're you? Wotcha want?'

Her voice was an unpleasant blend of subservience and intimidation as she assessed the situation to see which might serve her best.

I had worried I might not have been able to understand her. Everyone around here seemed to speak in some kind of private dialect. She had a strong accent but she was comprehensible.

I drew myself up, gripping my spray as hard as I could. My mind played pictures of her leaping upon me, wrapping those long skinny arms around me, biting at my face, enveloping me in a miasma of evil and malice.

I made my voice firm. I couldn't afford to show even the slightest sign of weakness. She would be on me in a moment.

'You know who I am, Mrs Scrope. You know why I have come.'

She said nothing. The seconds ticked on. And old Scrope might be home any moment now.

'I am here to call you to account.'

Now she was subservient and whining. 'I ain't done nothing.'

I held her gaze and made myself stay calm. 'You know what you have done, Mrs Scrope, and you know what you have not done. The time has come for you to pay for it.'

Something flickered behind her eyes at the word pay. Subservience disappeared. She glanced down at Matthew, standing beside me,

tense and still.

‘Wossee said?’

I took a chance. I was gambling here. Gambling with both our lives maybe. One shout from her – just one – would bring people oozing out of the brickwork around us, tumbling into this tiny yard – that’s the tiny yard with only one easily blocked entrance. And what would happen to us then?

I felt Matthew clutch a fold of my dress.

I didn’t dare look down at him. I couldn’t afford to look away. I wished – I really wished I’d brought at least Markham with me. I could really have done with him at that moment, watching my back and keeping me safe. And with Peterson standing alongside me – as he always did. I was really beginning to regret the white-hot fury that had driven me across the yard to confront this awful woman. She was ill. She was a miser and a bully. Nothing I could say or do to her would make any difference. What did I think I was doing? How could I possibly make a difference to anything happening here. I remembered Leon’s words. ‘Everyone feared her. Even her husband.’

She inspired fear. She knew it. I wondered how many people had stood where I stood now, quaking in their boots – literally in my case – while this giant pale spider turned their blood to ice and robbed them of all thought and movement.

Well, not me. I’ve always said – if you’re scared of something then get in there and give it a good kicking. Then go back and do it again – just to show it who’s boss. I took one step towards her. And then another until I was right in her face.

She wasn’t afraid – not of me, anyway – but she was disconcerted. I guessed most people usually kept a distance. She wasn’t used to people invading her personal space. She didn’t like it. Few people do.

I pushed my face into hers, ignoring the stench of her breath.

‘You know what he has said,’ I said, feeling my way because I was still unsure how to get us out of this. I could threaten her with the beagle or with the magistrates, and that wouldn’t touch her. She didn’t care. But if she was indeed what I thought she was then there was one area in which she was very vulnerable.

‘Who are you?’

I kept my voice very low. Only she could hear me. ‘I am everything you fear. I am your nightmare. I am the thing that will come for you out of the dark. I know your secrets. I know what you hide. And tonight, I have come for you.’

She smirked unpleasantly. ‘You don’t frighten me. I can have ten men here in a minute and where would you be then, my fine lady?’

I felt sweat roll down my back. Cold and slimy.

‘Ten men? In here? Is that what you want? All the things you’ve

hidden for so long. The things you've kept safe. How much do you trust these ten men? Enough to let them ... in here?'

I pushed past her, carefully keeping myself between her and Matthew, and entered into a nightmare.

I had envisioned a cold, bare room, with no fire and possibly no furniture either, but I was wrong. This room was far from empty. Because old Ma Scrope was a hoarder. And she'd been at it for a very long time. There was a room in here somewhere, its outline almost completely obscured by piles – no, mountains – of mildewed junk, all crammed in any old how, that reached all the way to the ceiling in places. I found a small patch of clear floor on which to stand, held on tightly to Matthew and looked around me.

Empty, it would have been a largish room with a small bedchamber off to one side. The one tiny window was tightly sealed. Everything was thick with grease and dirt. The fireplace was unlit and stuffed full of what looked like old shoes and boots. Piles of clothes lay everywhere – men's, women's, not sorted in any way, but just thrown down, layer upon layer, dating back years, I shouldn't wonder. Everything smelled of soot – that would be her husband – and urine. God knows what her sanitary arrangements were.

A scarred and battered wooden table stood in the centre of the room and was cluttered with miscellaneous tat. It looked as if we'd interrupted her in the middle of rifling through what looked like someone's last possessions. Everywhere I looked there were battered pots full of holes, and what looked like old saucepans obviously beyond repair, bits of worm-ridden furniture, legless chairs and broken cabinets. All the debris and detritus of life, all the unwanted leftovers of other people's lives were stacked here, rammed into this one space, and all looking ready to topple at any moment.

Even as I looked, there was a sudden movement in the corner and something scuttled away. Every surface was covered in mouse and rat droppings. Every disease known to man must be incubating in this room. Why wasn't this woman dead?

Two miserable flickering candles made the shadows jump. Through the open door I caught a glimpse of the even gloomier smaller room. An unmade bed was piled high with every type of rubbish imaginable. I wondered where they slept. No wonder old Scrope went out drinking every night. The miracle was that he came home at all.

I'm neat. I put things away. I don't like clutter around me. Neither does Leon. The thought of living in a room like this made me want to clutch my skirts around me and just run away.

'The boy's father was satisfied.'

Unbelievably, I'd been so caught up in this awful place, I'd almost forgotten about old Ma Scrope. She'd closed behind me while I wasn't

looking, standing between me and the door. This is what comes of leaving Markham behind.

I found myself eye to eye with her. We were the same height. I could feel her breath on my face. A cold fury fell upon me and gave me strength. Close though we were, I took an extra half step forwards and smiled with my mouth.

‘I am not the boy’s father. I am his mother.’ I reached out and picked a louse off her shoulder, cracking it between my fingers. ‘And you should know, Mrs Scrope, that I am not as understanding as my husband. Or as gentle. Or as restrained. In fact, Mrs Scrope, I am your worst nightmare and if you do not immediately amend your treatment of the unfortunate boys in your care, then I will pursue you, Mrs Scrope, without pity and without rest, until the day you die. And on that happy day, when you stand, naked and afraid before all those you have wronged, then, Mrs Scrope, I swear to you – I will rip your miserable soul from your miserable body, and send it, torn and bleeding, into the dark places of Hell, where it will wail, unheard, for all eternity. Know this, Mrs Scrope, that whatever you do to these boys in this world, I will do unto you ten thousand times over in the next. I will pursue you, Mrs Scrope, without pity and without rest. I will always be at your shoulder – watching and waiting. I will be the last thing you see in this world and the first thing you see in the next. From me and my revenge, Mrs Scrope – you will never be free.’

I became aware I hadn’t breathed in a very long time. I didn’t know my own voice. I didn’t even know I was pushing her backwards until she had her back to the table and could go no further. I’ve no idea what I looked like, but I could see naked terror in her eyes as she tried to lean away from me. Her mouth was working. Saliva ran from one corner and her colour, not good to begin with, was as grey as the clothes she wore. I could see I’d made my point.

And yes, I do know that none of that was exactly in the Christmas spirit.

And yes, I do know none of it was a good example to young Matthew.

And yes, according to the rules of nice people, I should probably have sat down and reasoned gently with her.

And yes, I know we’re not supposed to harm contemporaries, but no one ever said anything about not frightening the living shit out of them, so my conscience was clear.

And yes, it was definitely time to go. In situations like this, always ensure you have the last word and then get out.

I whirled around and seized Matthew’s arm. As I did so, I felt my skirts catch on something but it was important to get out of here before she recovered herself. I yanked impatiently and something

shifted somewhere. Somewhere in the gloom I caught a movement as a pile of something began to slide. And then another pile. Suddenly, it seemed to me, in the dim light of the two candles, that the whole room was moving. Like a landslide.

Shit.

I didn't hang around. I had Matthew out through the door and half way across the yard as, behind us, all her carefully constructed edifices of rubbish and old junk and useless paraphernalia cascaded down around her ears. Her world – literally – was falling apart. The noise was enormous. I wondered whether the house itself would survive.

We ran for it and her screams – whether of rage or fear I never knew – followed us all the way back down Grit Lane.

We burst, breathless into the pod.

I said, 'Door,' and suddenly, we were warm and safe.

I switched the kettle on and turned to Matthew, who looked a little pale.

'How are you feeling?'

He nodded. It doesn't take much to make him dirty and although, as far as I knew, he'd not touched anything in Ma Scrope's house, he'd managed to bring a good portion of dust and grease with him.

I went to wipe his face and for once he didn't jerk his head away. I sat down beside him and put my arm around him, half expecting him to shrug it off as he often did, but not this time. This time he curled up beside me.

I bent down and whispered, 'You're a good boy, Matthew. And a good friend. One day you will have lots of friends who will love you because you are a good boy.'

He sat up. 'Why are you crying?'

I wiped the tears away. 'Because no one ever told me I was a good girl and would have lots of friends and I really wish they had.'

He thought about this. 'Jamie and Joshua are my friends.'

'And you took them a nice Christmas present. And they were pleased to see you.'

'But ...'

'Yes,' I said gently, knowing what he was thinking, 'but I did my best to make sure she treats them a little better in future. Who knows, next year they might have a much nicer Christmas.'

And I could have kicked myself but it was too late.

'We could go now and see.'

It would appear my offspring had embraced the Maxwell Illegal Christmas-Jump Tradition with enthusiasm. I'm such a bad mother.

I smiled. 'I don't think so. To do this once was bad enough. To do it

twice is just asking for trouble.'

'Are we in trouble?'

'Well, I am, certainly.'

'But we could make sure they're all right. We don't have to stay. Just look.'

My own eyes stared up at me. I stared back and cursed my genes.

The kettle clicked off and I got up and pretended to be busy making the tea when I was actually having a bit of a think.

'Are you having a bit of a think?' he said, as I presented him with his mug.

'What?'

'That's what you say. I'm having a bit of a think. Are you having a bit of a think?'

I scowled at him. 'When did you become so talkative?'

'Are you?'

I sent up a prayer to the god of historians to preserve me from chatty children.

'Yes. Give me a moment.'

He blew on his tea and slurped. 'So, are you thinking?'

'I would be if people would let me get on with it.'

He subsided and I had a bit of a think. It wouldn't be difficult. A minor adjustment to the temporal coordinate and we could jump forward twelve months. If I'd been alone I'd have done it just to see if old Ma Scrope had improved any. But – a big but – I was guessing she hadn't. Whatever was the matter with her was far beyond my puny threats. And there was a very real possibility that little Jamie wouldn't have made it through the winter. How would Matthew feel about that? Would it be kinder to take him home now? He didn't need to know his friends might not have survived. I looked down at his dark head. Or did he?

I said, 'Listen up a moment, Matthew. I have an important question to ask you.'

He put down his empty mug.

'I can take you to next Christmas, yes. But things might not have got any better for them. How will you feel about that?'

He thought for a long time, turning his empty mug around and around. My mind flew back to a time when Leon and I had sat in a pod having a difficult conversation and he'd done exactly the same thing.

Eventually, he looked up and said, 'Yes. I want to do it.'

'All right then.' I got up. 'Same rules apply.'

He nodded.

I updated the coordinates and said, 'Computer, initiate jump.'

'Jump initiated.'

The world went white.

We landed in exactly the same place. Except that now it was snowing. Big white blobby snow that covered a multitude of sins and made everything look prettier than it was.

I sent him into the tiny bathroom to wash his face while I tidied myself. There was a lot of splashing and, yes, when he came out, he'd miraculously managed to shift quite a lot of the dirt around his face without removing any of it at all.

I tightened his muffler, checked he was wearing his gloves and pulled his hat down. 'Ready?'

He pulled it back up again. 'Yes.'

We squeezed out of the pod again. Less easily this time around. I appeared to have put on weight!

We set off down the alleyway. No one else had been this way. Ours were the first footprints. Emerging into the street, we set out for Grit Lane. There were a few people around, trudging head down through the snow. I'm not sure if it was the Christmas card aspect, but the whole area seemed considerably less sinister and threatening than before. We strode out bravely.

Even Grit Lane looked good. Until we arrived.

We stood at the entrance to the court and looked around. My heart sank. It wasn't good news. The tiny wooden shed that had been their home was empty. We didn't even have to go in. The door stood wide open and, judging by the earth and snow heaped up around it, had stood open for some time. Of the boys, there was no sign whatsoever.

I felt sick. What had I done?

I said, 'Matthew, I'm sorry. I tried to make things better and I failed. I'm so sorry.'

He nodded, wordlessly.

I eased my cold hands inside my muff, finding my pepper spray still there. We're really not supposed to harm contemporaries ... on the other hand, it was Christmas ... a time of small treats ... I strode across the yard and hammered on the door. Just a very quick spray ... nothing too serious ...

The door opened letting out a gust of light and heat and cooking smells and a very large lady with wild hair escaping from an elaborate cap and with a flushed face stood before me.

I was so surprised I couldn't think.

'Yes?' she said, dusting flour off her arms.

'Um. I'm sorry, I was looking for Mrs Scrope.'

'I'm Mrs Scrope.' Her voice was a deep, rich contralto. There couldn't have been a greater contrast between that Mrs Scrope and this Mrs Scrope. Oh God, was I back in an alternate universe?

‘Um ...’

‘You mean the other Mrs Scrope.’

‘Yes, I think I do.’

‘Dead.’

Oh God. I’d killed her. I remembered the piles of junk falling around her. Her screams ... What had I done?

She caught sight of Matthew, half hidden behind me.

‘I know you. It’s young Joseph, isn’t it?’

He nodded.

‘Um. We’ve come to visit Jamie and Joshua, but they’re not here?’ I made it a question.

‘I’ve sent them out for the goose and a few other things as well. Come in.’

‘Um ... Thank you.’

We edged our way into a room I would never have recognised. The floor was clear and had been scrubbed to within an inch of its life. The stones gleamed. A huge fire burned in the grate, belching out enough heat for a blast furnace. Bubbling pots and pans were set all around it. In an alcove to the side of the chimney, a curtain was looped back and I could see two small mattresses with blankets I recognised folded neatly on top. Shirts and a jacket hung from small pegs.

In front of the fire were two battered armchairs and two small wooden stools.

A well-scrubbed table in the middle of the room was covered in bowls and basins. A coating of flour covered everything, including Mrs Scrope herself.

‘Ah,’ she said, catching me staring around. ‘You’ll not have seen it since her time.’

I shook my head. ‘How did she die?’

She shrugged. ‘No one knows. She were always a bit strange and then, around last Christmas, she got worse. Always looking over her shoulder she were. And muttering to herself. They reckoned she was regretting the way she treated them boys although I don’t know about that. And the way she treated that daft ha’pporth Scrope, as well. How he put up with her we never knew. Anyway, they found her stiff and cold one morning in January, half buried under piles of furniture. They reckoned it had all come down on top of her in the night. Can’t say Scrope was heartbroken. No one was. He set to and cleared the stuff out. I tell you, ma’am, you wouldn’t believe what she had in here. And everywhere – money. In twists of paper, old socks, old tins, hidden up the chimney, in the walls, even. Only pennies but it were quite a tidy sum in the end.’

She shot me a sudden glance. I grinned at her. I could follow her

thinking exactly.

‘Me and my sister had the bake shop round the corner. My husband had been took with the newmonnya and Scrope was never that bad before she got her claws in him, so we – me and my sister – we took him round some food, and for them poor little boys as well. Just in time for the little one, I reckoned. He’d never have seen out another winter. Seemed a shame for a good man to go to waste – me without a husband and him without a wife – so we married. No sense in waiting ...’

She grinned at me again. There was no sense in letting an unattached man with a good business and a fair amount of loose cash going to waste, was there? I completely agreed with her. I wouldn’t mind betting she and her sister had been round here before the first Mrs Scrope’s body had even cooled. Good for them.

‘Here you are, young man,’ she said, slapping two tartlets on a plate and handing them to Matthew. ‘Careful, they’re still hot.’

He sat down on one of the stools and added jam to the collection of miscellaneous stains on his clothes and face.

‘We married in the February and the first thing I did was make him get rid of the business. All that soot weren’t doing him no good at all and I told him he’s not a young man any longer. He’s in firewood delivery now. Easier job and he’ll live longer.’ She began to pound her bread dough into submission.

‘And the boys?’ I said, fascinated, but remembering why we were here.

‘Ah well, that Joshua, he’s helping out. He’s a good lad.’

I hardly dared ask. ‘And young Jamie?’

‘Now there’s a lad with a head on his shoulders. Helps out my sister in the shop. She’s taken a bit of a shine to him. She doesn’t have any of her own and her husband’s about as much use as tits on a bull.’ She picked up the dough, slapped it into a bowl and marked a cross on the top. ‘They’ll be back any moment now. Will you wait?’

‘No, we must be going, but thank you. Matthew?’

He stood up and handed her back the empty plate. ‘Thank you.’

She ruffled his hair, looked at her hand and then wiped it on her apron. ‘Well, don’t you have lovely manners. Shall I tell them you were here?’

I nodded. ‘Yes, please. We’re sorry to miss them but we must go.’

She opened the door. The snow was still swirling down outside. ‘Far to go?’

‘No, my husband is waiting for us at the end of the lane.’ I liked her, but that didn’t mean I wouldn’t take basic precautions. I put out my hand. ‘A merry Christmas to you, Mrs Scrope. And to your family, too.’

She stared at my hand for a moment and then wiped hers on her apron. 'And to you, Mrs ...' I remained silent. '... To you, ma'am.'

I took Matthew's hand and we set off back into the snow. We heard them before we saw them. Shouting and boisterous laughter rang down the street. We'd been lucky so far in that we'd hardly encountered anyone, but I didn't like the sound of this. We needed to make ourselves scarce.

I looked around for a convenient doorway and drew Matthew inside. There was to be absolutely no interaction with any more contemporaries. I was in enough trouble as it was.

I needn't have worried. Three figures approached. One, a man, was pulling a homemade sledge. A small boy sat on the sledge, surrounded by bags of what looked like vegetables. I could see carrots and those white things that look like carrots and I never know whether they're turnips or parsnips. The boy was clutching a plucked goose nearly as big as he was – the head hung over his shoulder, swaying slightly. Joshua trotted alongside, carrying a box which clinked. I stiffened, but it wasn't a big box. Bottles of beer, probably, and perhaps some port for Mrs Scrope, who certainly looked as if she enjoyed the good things in life.

The sledge was swinging from side to side. Little Jamie was shrieking with laughter. Joshua set down his box, bent down, made a snowball and threw it at the man I assumed was Jeremiah Scrope, hitting him square between the shoulder blades. He roared with rage and I felt Matthew stir beside me.

I held him tightly. 'Hush. It's all in fun.'

Dropping the rope, the man scooped up a handful of snow. Battle was joined as snowballs flew through the air. Both boys threw themselves on Scrope, who fell dramatically backwards into the snow. They lay for a while, laughing, and then climbed to their feet. Scrope picked up Jamie by the back of his jacket and plonked him back on the sledge, dropping the goose on his lap again. Joshua picked up his box and they set off, still laughing and shouting at each other. All of them learning to be a family.

We stood and watched them disappear into the snow, on their way to what I guessed would be the best Christmas of their lives.

I looked down at Matthew, still staring after them and waited until he was ready.

Eventually, he looked up at me. His lip was trembling. 'They didn't see me.'

I said gently, 'No, they didn't.'

'They were too busy.'

'They were happy. Aren't you happy they were happy?'

He nodded, swallowing.

I crouched in the snow beside him. ‘Sweetheart, just because they don’t need you any longer doesn’t mean they’ll ever forget you. You’ll always be their friend Joseph, who brought them the first Christmas present they ever had. You were the beginning of good things happening in their lives.’

He thought about it for a minute as the snow fell silently around us, then nodded again, slipped his hand into mine, and we made our way back to the pod and St Mary’s.

Back to all sorts of trouble.

For a start, Peterson and Markham were waiting for us.

‘What ho!’ I said cheerily, as we exited after decontaminating and changing our clothes.

‘How did it go?’ said Peterson.

‘Perfectly.’

‘Oh, come on,’ he said in disbelief.

‘No, it did. Everything was absolutely fine. I’m beginning to think the problem is you two.’

‘What?’

‘Well, no one fell in the Nile. No one was attacked by any indigenous livestock. No one peed on anyone. War did not break out. And, most importantly, no one set fire to anything. I don’t think those are claims either of you two could make after a jump. Not with any conviction anyway.’

‘Changing the subject,’ said Markham, bending down. ‘What is this child covered in?’

Matthew, who would only submit to being called ‘this child’ by his idol Markham, grinned up at him. ‘Jam.’

‘Why are you ...?’

Peterson shoved him aside. ‘Never mind him. What happened?’

I felt Matthew take a breath to speak.

‘Nothing much,’ I said, quickly. ‘We looked at the snow and watched a snowball fight. Didn’t we?’

Matthew nodded.

‘So you see, nothing at all to worry about. No dangers, no adventures, no problems of any kind. Everything is absolutely fine.’

‘Good afternoon,’ said Leon and I jumped a mile.

‘Daddy!’ Matthew hurled himself at Leon. I tried very hard to stifle a pang of jealousy. I had thought, after this afternoon, that I’d made a little progress with him, but obviously not. He never hurled himself at me.

Leon might not be able to fold his arms but that didn’t mean I wasn’t on the receiving end of the full Farrell frown. ‘Max ...’

I gestured at Peterson and Markham. ‘Pas devant les enfants.’

Markham turned to Peterson. 'Si ce n'est pas mignon? Ils pensent que nous ne le comprenons pas.'

'Oui. Quels idiots.'

I appreciated their efforts but Leon ignored them. 'Seriously, Max? You're speaking French to me?'

Leon was born in France. He's lived a lot of his life in England and as far as I know, considers himself English, except when England crash disastrously out of yet another international tournament and he swears he's going back to live in France. I point out that the French are even worse at football than the English – even supposing such a thing is possible – and he'd do better to remain on this side of the Channel because the food's nicer and, never mind, perhaps they'll do better next time. He responds by remarking that proper wives would get their husband a beer to see them through these difficult moments. Since no one can remember any important tournament when England haven't crashed out in the opening rounds, I tread the well-beaten path to the chiller and hand him two beers – one for now and the other to nurse him through the inevitable action replays of England's worst moments, because I'm a good wife and he's lucky to have me. He sits, a beer in each fist as half a dozen ex-footballers struggle to describe the national team's latest performance without using the word 'abysmal'. I generally leave him alone with his grief.

I wished I could do that now, but my feeble effort to side track him had failed and now there was music to be faced. I racked my brains for words to explain how important this had been to both Matthew and me. Nothing happened. The god of historians had obviously pushed off for the holidays and I was on my own.

No, I wasn't. Markham stepped up again. 'Is there a Master Farrell here? He's needed to help bring in the Yule log.'

'He's right here,' I said, pushing him forwards and preparing to follow them out of the door. 'Anyone fancy a drink?'

'Just a moment,' said Leon, gently drawing me back.

Markham cast me a sympathetic glance and then the door banged behind them and silence fell.

I stood, staring at my feet, thinking what a complete mess I'd made of things.

'How could you, Max? How could you run such a risk?'

'There was no risk,' I said, conveniently forgetting the shadowy people in the doorways, the nasty things in the alleyway, and the even nastier Ma Scrope. 'It was just a Christmas visit to old friends. He took them some food. Just something to make their lives easier. A little light in their darkness. Don't you wish someone had done the same for Matthew when he lived there?'

'I can't believe you would risk him in this way. Anything could

have happened.'

'Well, it didn't. He wanted to take gifts to his friends and say goodbye properly. I'm very proud that even though he's here with us – safe and comparatively happy – that his thoughts were with them and their suffering. And he was never in any danger, Leon. What do you take me for? We saw the other two boys – you'll remember them, I'm sure – and he helped them. Everything turned out fine.'

My voice trailed away because it hadn't – not really. I think I'd hoped that somehow Matthew and I might bond a little ... find some common ground ... that he might warm to me, perhaps ... that the love and trust we'd once had ... Although, now I'd met old Ma Scrope, I could well understand his dislike of women. I sighed. Perhaps it was never meant to be. Perhaps some things, once lost, can never be regained.

Despite my best efforts, something of the feelings I was trying to hide must have shown on my face, because Leon took my hand and said very carefully and very gently, 'I know why you did it, Max, and it will happen, I promise you. Perhaps it will be so gradual that you won't notice it happening, but I know that one day you and Matthew will understand each other. I think you need to understand that it might take a very long time, but if you're patient and ...'

The door crashed back against the wall and Matthew surged back into the paint store, somehow even dirtier than when I had last seen him two minutes ago.

'Daddy, I forgot to tell you. Mummy shouted at old Ma Scrope and she DIED.'

Oh God ...

He looked up at Leon, his eyes shining. 'Mummy's awesome.'

Then the door banged behind him and he was gone again.

Leon stared after him for a moment and then turned back to me. 'On the other hand, what do I know? Fancy a drink?'

THE END

As always, thanks to everyone at Accent Press for all their help throughout the year.

And to my editor, Rebecca Lloyd, who has again overcome my massive ignorance of all things concerning punctuation, grammar and spelling and generally keeps me on the straight and narrow.